

Tours of Latvia's military heritage, as offered by the Country Traveller "Baltic Green Belt" project

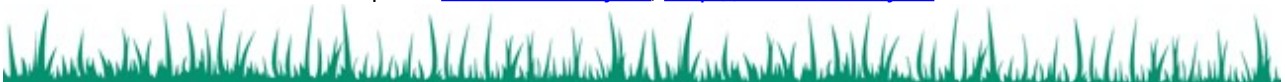
Heritage of the Iron Curtain. For nearly 40 years, Europe was split by an Iron Curtain from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea. European countries developed industry and agriculture, but the restricted zone on both sides of the Iron Curtain remained untouched. After the fall of the Berlin wall, the "European Green Belt" was established to protect environmental values in the region. This is a network of protected environmental territories which stretches through 23 countries and is approximately 8,500 kilometres long, stretching from the northernmost point of Europe along the borders of Albania, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and Turkey. There are 3,272 protected territories in the 25-kilometre buffer zone on either side of the Green Belt. More information about this can be found at <http://europeangreenbelt.org>. The "Baltic Green Belt" project is centred at the University of Kiel. 25 partners from Baltic Sea countries are part of the European Green Belt, and now the once-missing parts of the belt in the Baltic States and Poland are part of the project. It is supported by the EU's Baltic Sea Region Programme.

Today it is hard to imagine that it was just a few decades ago that access to the Baltic Sea was limited to just a few beaches. People were allowed to be on the beach only during daylight. At night, massive projectors were used to light the beaches, which were ploughed up. Massive observation towers still stand witness to the strictness with which the Soviet Union protected its borders. Even the relatives of people who lived in the coastal area needed a special permit to visit them. The document had to be presented at all control facilities. Sometimes permits were refused, and other times border guards simply ignored them. People at Cape Kolka, which stands between the Baltic Sea and the Bay of Rīga, were not allowed to swim in the Baltic Sea, for fear that some of them might try to swim all the way to Sweden's Gotland Island ... at a distance of 150 km. The outer borders of the USSR were a strategic object, and the authorities wanted to unnecessary attention to be devoted to it. It is clear that development in these regions was strictly restricted, which mean that nature in the area remained mostly untouched.



A monument to Lenin in the forests of Kurzeme between Īvande and Gudenieki, used as a pit stop during adventure competitions

Locations of the Military Heritage: A Potential Tourism Resource. Ever since the post-Soviet Russian military left Latvia, many of its former objects have been freely accessible. This is a unique opportunity to establish a modern and competitive tourism offer. The prison at the Liepāja naval port and the underground bunkers at Līgatne have become, with justification, very popular. The same is true of the Battle Museum at More, the Fortress of Kurzeme Museum in Zante, the partisan bunkers of Īle, and the Lt Roberts Rubenis Battalion Museum in Ugāle. Sadly, we do not always appreciate the potential of tourism resources which relate to evidence of the recent past – Lenin monuments, abandoned military facilities, artillery missile hangars, and the like. Many of the abandoned facilities have been abandoned in the full sense of the word, and they are collapsing, but Structural Fund monies can be used to turn them into interesting tourism destinations. Tourism related to military heritage is a popular subject with a specific target audience. A study of specific facilities has allowed us to identify recommendations on the sustainable use of objects of the military heritage for tourism in NATURA 2000 and other protected natural territories. The recommendations are based on the accessibility of the various sites, their location, the extent to which they would be of interest to tourists (both as objects of military heritage and as environmental locations), the necessary investments, ecological sensitivity, etc. The recommendations are being drafted by tourism and environmental protection specialists, and they will be freely available to all who are interested in them.



LAUKU CEĻOTĀJS

A database of former military objects on the Internet. As part of the “Baltic Green Belt” project, Country Traveller has examined 80 military objects from various eras. Many of these were used for military needs during the age of the Iron Curtain, but the fact is that some date back to the tsarist era and World War I. We have established a database with photographs and descriptions of the various secret locations, what they were used for, what happened there, and how the presence of the military affected the everyday lives of local residents. Each object has its own photo gallery and a Google map which allows people to see a satellite image which makes it clear how strategic some of the locations were. Nearly each location has a story, joke or legend told by eyewitnesses. This is a separate and special part of the heritage. The database can be found on the Country Traveller homepage:



Zenith missile brigade at Cirpstene

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http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/wrth/military_lv/html.

Tell your story! It is by no means our purpose to suggest that people should visit abandoned Soviet-era military objects such as military bases, missile bases, etc., because they can still pose dangers to travellers. The objects that are in the database, along with the eyewitness stories and information used to describe them, are important so as to make sure that we don't forget our history and the things that existed and happened at these locations. What's more, this is history which is slowly disappearing from the collective memory as people pass on. Country Traveller would like to ask anyone who has a story to tell about Latvia's military past to ring us on +371-6761-7600, or write to baiba@celotajs.lv if he or she wishes to have the story posted on the homepage. Anyone who wants to enter a story about a specific location in the database just needs to open the “Stāsts” (Story) section in the description of the specific object.

Let's publish a map! Next autumn, also as part of the “Baltic Green Belt” project, we plan to publish a map of tourism-related military objects, listing those places which are appropriate for visitors. The project covers the western coastline of Latvia, but we'll be covering interesting locations of military heritage all around Latvia. Here's information about the project: http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/prof/proj/GreenBelt/GreenBelt_lv.html.

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